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# New Soviet tactics jar guerrillas

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The skill with which the Soviets are manipulating the Afghan resistance forces in Paktia province into fighting the pitched battle, which is always catastrophic for guerrilla forces, is thought by Western analysts to be particularly ominous.

Confronted with a threat that resistance leaders felt they could neither ignore nor absorb — an assault on their base at Zhawar, the most important inside Afghanistan — these leaders gathered all their forces instead of abandoning the base and, as guerrillas can do, dispersed.

The guerrillas did exactly what the Soviets were hoping they would do. Wave after wave of Soviet-made Su-22 bombers and MiG-21 and MiG-23 fighter-bombers dropped 500-pound bombs by day and by night on lightly armed guerrilla forces that had no air defenses. Artillery and deadly Katyusha rockets pounded the survivors; and then 10,000 Afghan government and Soviet regular troops, airlifted by helicopter, carried out ground assaults on the surrounded guerrillas with tank support.

The dearth of radio communication equipment among the Afghan resistance forces made it almost im-

possible for commanders to resist the onslaught in a coordinated and effective manner. As guerrilla units sought to withdraw, the government's tribal militia carried out ambushes, which further raised the death toll.

It will be some time before the full extent of casualties is known; estimates now vary wildly. Some intelligence estimates indicate that as many as 1,500 resistance guerrillas were killed and 2,500 wounded during the battle of Zhawar. Some estimates, attributed to guerrilla commanders, range much lower than these figures. Many more were wounded in counterattacks at Kandahar and Khowst. The attacks aimed at drawing enemy forces away from Zhawar.

The occupation and destruction of the Afghan resistance complexes in Zhawar by Soviet and Afghan government (DRA) forces could become a turning point in the Soviet war against the resistance. The

fighting at Zhawar, while important in its own right, say analysts, should be considered in the context of the overall escalation of the Soviet-DRA military campaign against the resistance in the eastern provinces that border Pakistan.

This campaign has continued since the winter and already has cost the resistance forces heavy casualties even before the fighting at Zhawar.

This eastern border campaign is part of a larger effort to sever the lines of communication of the resistance. This drive began last fall with an offensive by the Soviet-DRA forces in the Kunar Valley, from which several important passes lead over the mountains into Pakistan.

Simultaneously, the Soviets resupplied and reinforced the main garrisons and forts in the eastern provinces. In some places, such as Khost and Urgan where the garrisons were surrounded by resistance forces or where the resistance repeatedly attacked transportation, the Soviets chose to resupply the bases by air. Special efforts were made to conceal the magnitude of the reinforcements, and the Soviets took pains to avoid major clashes with the resistance during the reinforcement period.

The Soviets did not begin to capitalize on their newly built-up "assets" until mid-February. They launched a three-pronged offensive from the city of Jalalabad, which lies halfway between the Khyber Pass and Kabuk in Nangarhar province. One force headed towards Asadabad on the Kunar River. Another advanced towards Tor Khama, the plateau region below the Khyber Pass, from the north, while a third moved

towards the pass after sweeping to the south.

This campaign began just as the Afghan guerrillas began their spring effort to resupply forces in Nangarhar province. These troops were hard-pressed for resupply after suffering the effects of the Soviet's winter strikes. The Kunar Valley raid not only destroyed the infrastructure of the Afghan resistance forces, but also cut vital lines of communications and severely disrupted efforts to recover from the winter's hardships and prepare for a summer offensive.

Toward the end of February, the Soviets launched an offensive in the eastern reaches of Paktia province, with simultaneous salients from Kabul, Gardez and Ghazni. Most of the ground troops were Afghan government forces and tribal militiamen, dressed in ordinary civilian clothing. These tribesmen, loyal to the government in Kabul, include a significant number of former resistance guerrillas who had operated in Paktia and are intimately familiar not only with the terrain, but with many of the resistance operational areas, bases, travel routes, and storage sites.

The Soviet offensive in Paktia is aimed at destroying the infrastructure and command and control organization of the resistance in the border regions. If successful, the Soviets will be able to interdict resupply of the resistance forces in the interior.